Community Literacy Journal

Volume 17
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Access as Community Literacy*

Article 5

Fall 2022

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Recommended Citation
Martinez, Tyler (2022) "Everything You Need to Eat: Food, Access, and Community," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 5.
DOI: 10.25148/CLJ.17.1.010645
Available at: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol17/iss1/5

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Everything You Need to Eat: Food, Access, and Community

Tyler Martinez

Abstract

Skills, knowledge, time, ability, access, and cultural and societal norms all sponsor and constrain food literacies. Measuring the effects of class, race, cultural identity, knowledge, and ability on food access requires an understanding of how communities and institutions sponsor food literacy. Nutritionists have developed a framework for researching and measuring food literacy; however, the focus falls on measuring individual food literacy, which I argue is a form of *epistemic whiteness* that refuses to acknowledge the outsized responsibility of institutions in creating systems of food access and flattens the role community plays in mitigating barriers to access. A critical understanding of disability and the reciprocity intrinsic to community literacy research are offered as a way to move from measurement to sponsorship of community food literacies.

Keywords

food literacy, food access, disability studies, community literacy, sustainability

I left catfish and white bean Fridays when I moved to Virginia, those evenings when my innumerous extended family crowded around my grandparents' too-small kitchen. I left those *ça fait chaud* afternoons fishing off the deck behind my aunt's house with my cousins. I can't follow my dad around the competitive jambalaya circuit or drive my mom and I to New Orleans for a food fest on the riverfront. I don't get to spend my evenings in the kitchen with my sister, benefiting from the knowledge she earned over the course of a four-year culinary degree. I don't have immediate access to the friends that I gathered over a decade of slinging lattes and building sandwiches across South Louisiana.

I struggled to understand and access the habits of food that would sustain me when I started a Ph.D. program. I landed in a glorified doctoral dorm negotiating for access to fridge space and microwave minutes, navigating frozen-burrito and fast-foodways that are expensive and difficult to access. When seminars let out at 10pm, I headed to the grocery store to forage–determined to buy something to eat but not knowing quite what to expect to find that I'd be willing and able to eat. A thousand miles from the Cajun and Creole foodways that sustained my 29 years, I was lonely and hungry and unsure of how to eat sustainably on a graduate student's salary in one of the largest metro areas in the world. And too often, my anxieties about being the

best student and the cyclical depressive crash still cause me to neglect even attempting to access food.

There's a different story to tell about why I chose to leave Louisiana to pursue a Ph.D. and academic career, but queer-trauma fueled anxiety and depression kept me from feeling like I had any opportunity to succeed there. I could always count on community to provide another meal, whether it was my mom coming through with gumbo she purposefully made too much of or a friend inviting me to a "staff" party at a restaurant in the French Quarter. I expected to struggle to advance an academic career because I was literally raised in a swamp, but I didn't expect that the combination of my mental disability and a shock of *habitus* would so disrupt my ability to access food. The foodways that we inhabit are more complex than habit would have us realize.

When it comes to food, access is survival. Access to food requires community–a community that respects the needs of its members even when it can't fully understand them. From an intuitive interdisciplinary definition, nutrition scientists have developed food literacy into a set of domains and components. Those domains and components construct an ontology and methodology useful for quantifying food literacy to facilitate its measurement. The primary domain of food literacy is access, specifically, "being able to access food through some source on a regular basis with very limited resources," is highlighted by experts as the core component of food literacy. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is useful for visualizing the networks that connect individuals and communities to food within social and political institutions (Power 48). Individual's *habitus* of food–the confluence of skill, knowledge, experience, ability, and ideology–sponsors practices of access. I borrow that sense of "sponsorship" from Deborah Brandt's work; literacies are enabled or constrained through the sponsorship of individuals, communities, and institutions. The constraints of food access on a community are determined by global food systems that are prone to sudden disruption–disrupting access disrupts survival.

I started researching food literacy because I struggled to find the time and energy to access enough food. And I wasn't quiet or passive about it. I touched every level of bureaucracy trying to figure out how to navigate food and access to kitchen equipment in Northern Virginia. First, I researched SNAP benefits, but the stipend associated with my fellowship provides just enough that I don't qualify, being single with no dependents, for the program. The campus community pantry left a bag with my name in the student union, filled with uncooked pasta and a couple cans of high-fructose corn syrup laden sauce–nothing I had the equipment to prepare. A financial advisor/administrator suggested I take out more loans. In my research, I met a professor in the nutrition department–she introduced me to the graduate student who manages the campus gardens and food forest. I learned a lot about the culture surrounding food on campus and in Northern Virginia, like the fact that Fairfax County operates a Food Access and Literacy Work Group which influences the food system I was learning to navigate. My emails to the director of that group went unanswered. No one had any actionable advice that could help me circumvent the habits that seemed my only

option. I was looking in the wrong places for the community food access that is baked into Cajun and Creole cultures.

As a framework, the domains and components of food literacy are valuable to scholars who, like me, study at the intersections of literacy and food access. They provide an extensive vocabulary with which to discuss the complexity of foodways—the social and political networks which sponsor food access. Food access is constrained by class, gender, ability, and race; however, research into food access in the field of food literacy is largely uncritical of definitions of disability and relies on preconceived barriers to access (Schwartz et al. 107). Specifically surrounding the concept of "individuals" and "communities," the field of food literacy could work to further remove the tinge of essentialism derived from the parent discipline, nutrition. *Food Literacy* essentializes the *habitus* of experience that affects minoritized racial and cultural groups and obfuscates the barriers to access for people with disabilities. The false binary between individuals' food choices as primarily nutritional or social fails to account for the complexities of how institutions sponsor food literacy.

There is a long history of food access discrimination against people of color and people with disabilities, such as anti-foraging laws and corporate discrimination.

> Eight percent of black Americans live in a census tract with a supermarket, compared to 31% of white Americans. Nationally, low-income zip codes have 30% more convenience stores–which are less likely than supermarkets to stock healthy foods–than middle-income zip codes. Ultimately, low-income communities lack viable access to healthy foods and are therefore forced to turn to unhealthy foods that are within their physical and economic reach (DePasquale et al. 912-913).

Those foodways forced on low-income Americans are unsustainable and corporatist–but teaching low-income students that the only foodways to which they have access are unsustainable without also sponsoring community literacies (and/or institutions) of food that are more sustainable *for them* potentially creates another barrier to access by adding anxiety to food insecurity.

By framing food access as the responsibility of the individual, *Food Literacy* works from what Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw terms *epistemic whiteness.* Epistemic whiteness is a refusal "to assess and transform relationships of domination and equality across the social field," (13). Individualism in food access upholds epistemic whiteness by reifying the illusion that individuals have power over systems of food access. The communities of food *habitus* that I've found sustaining aren't accounted for in food literacy's framework, so I posit instead an intersectional, interdisciplinary community food literacy that can research, measure, *and* sponsor accessible and sustainable foodways for everyone.

Helen Vigden, author of *Food Literacy,* and her colleagues call for international consensus on a definition of food literacy, citing fifty-one different definitions in use in 2019 (Thompson et al. 1). As nutrition scientists argue, defining food literacy is important for the project of measuring food literacy. But progress can be made before and beyond an international governmental agency decides to take up any one

definition of food literacy with intersectional, interdisciplinary attention to communities' *habitus* of food. And those of us in literacy studies are primed to offer a transformational perspective. We take as the focus of our research and pedagogy the sponsorship of literacies rather than the measurement of literacies. Dr. Veronica House (2014) describes the benefits of food literacy-focused service-learning curriculum in writing courses, to sponsor written literacies and broaden their food literacies. To this intersection I add the perspective of an anxious, queer Cajun, as an expansion of the possibilities of food literacy in the writing classroom and a call for literacy scholars to engage in the burgeoning field of food literacy.

Food literacy, as I understand it, is scaffolded with access at the base. The domains of food literacy, as identified through Vigden's collaborative research, are access, planning and management, selection, knowing where food comes from, preparation, eating, nutrition, and language (Vigden 37-48). Access is the foundation on which the other domains build. The components of food access developed by nutrition scientists are:

1.1 Being able to find food anywhere, that you can eat.

1.2 Being able to access food through some source on a regular basis with very limited resources.

1.3 Knowing that some places are cheaper than others.

1.4 Knowing how to access the shop, how to access the funds to purchase what you require and the knowledge in regard to if it's not coming from a shop for example, bush foods, aid agencies.

1.5 Getting out in the garden and growing food, even if it's herbs in a pot.

1.6 Being critical of the food supply system and being able to advocate for improvements. (Vigden 37)

These components of food access flatten the embodied experience of accessing food as an individual, subjected to the constraints of global foodways. Components 1.1, 1.3, and 1.4 are ranked as "desirable" for food access. Component 1.3 is the "core" component, and components 1.5 and 1.6 were ranked as "irrelevant." Component 1.1 centralizes the needs of the individual; however, the application of that component to the community or nation creates room for the voice of people with disabilities to be overlooked. When applied to the nation, who is the "you" in finding food anywhere that you can eat? Is it the person with the least access or a consensus–the average of food access enjoyed by the majority? Each component requires certain skills and knowledge, but 1.4 is of particular interest; it situates the individual in a network of economies, environments, and social programs, that combine to produce food systems.

Vigden asserts that food literacy applies at the "individual, household, community, and national levels to protect diet quality through change and support dietary resilience over time" (151). Food access applies at the level of the individual and household because they must use the other domains–language, preparation, selection,

eating, etc.–to materialize their access to food. It is the responsibility of communities and especially states and nations to build food systems that supply regular access to individuals and households. Individuals and even households cannot legally produce everything they need to eat in contemporary foodways–they produce resources to exchange for what they need, but with rare exception households in capitalist nations are not growing, hunting, or foraging for everything that they need to eat—and usually not even a portion of it.

A scoping review by Schwartz et al. highlights the gaps in research that projects measuring food literacy could seek to fill. The research team compiled 106 qualitative and quantitative articles, thirty-two of which focused on the association between disability and household food insecurity (HFI). “Disability was consistently related to an increase in HFI” and access to household assets is more protective for people with disabilities than increased income (Schwartz et al. 112). Even so, “Research from the United States suggests that people with disability may require an income two to three-times greater to avoid HFI due to added medical and adaptive equipment expenses, costs for personal assistants, or special dietary needs” (Schwartz et al. 112). At the level of the individual, people with disabilities need more income for food access because they must navigate social systems of access that are more costly for non-normative bodies.

Social networks can “mediate the relationship between disability and food” depending on the social environment (Schwartz et al. 112). At the community level, the food literacy of the group compensates for barriers to access faced by individuals; “qualitative research indicates that adequate social supports were able to compensate for inadequate geographical access or poor economic access…” (Schwartz et al. 112). Social networks can become barriers to food access as “social norms and values influence food access patterns” (Schwartz et al. 112). The social programs that provide food access to people living with food insecurity are often stigmatized which influence individuals’ experiences of community food literacy.

Beyond social networks, institutional and organizational policies are a primary determiner of food access.

> Access to social benefits varied across studies populations. Access to disability benefits could be limited by bureaucratic systems and requirements to prove disability. People who fail to qualify because they are “not disabled enough” or fail to fit within includable types of disability are particularly disadvantaged. (Schwartz et al. 113)

I argue that food literacy applies at the level of the institution or nation first because institutional policies create persistent barriers to access for individuals with disabilities. Measuring individual food literacy requires assessing an individual’s ability to navigate social programs and institutions, as indicated by component 1.4. Those of us interested in researching at the intersections of food access, literacy, and disability must “better consider the experiences of people with disabilities, rather than preconceiving disabling barriers” (Schwartz et al. 115). This includes the students in our classes that are relying on resources like campus pantries to have enough to eat.

Food literacy, as a framework, is criticized for being "over theorized and under practiced" as many are (Renwick and Smith 18). The limitations of the application of food literacy have resulted in a field of scholarship that focuses on the individual rather than communities or institutions and places "an overwhelming emphasis on food, with far less attention being paid to literacy" (Renwick and Smith 18). To combat the epistemic whiteness implicit in the focus on measuring individual food literacy, the methodologies that circulate in community literacy help to foreground reciprocal research. Food literacy research is always community literacy research because food literacy is always a community literacy. In a previous special issue of this journal Dawn S. Opel and Donnie Johnson Sackey cite two decades of research that asserts "Reciprocity as a Guiding Principle for Community-Engaged Research" which "asks us to establish networks of reciprocity via a self-reflexive rhetoric that includes:"

1. a reconsideration of how we define and categorize oppression before we enter communities;
2. a recognition of how we gain access to the lives of people outside universities;
3. a commitment to reciprocity, which necessitates the involvement of community partners in the interpretation of data and in how we tell stories that are not our own;
4. and an emphasis on scholarly activism, or commitment to effectuating change (1).

Scholars in literacy, rhetoric, and writing studies offer reciprocity as a self-reflexive framework for measuring food literacy that both centers community agency and works from a critical understanding of literacy.

In accordance with the *Ten Principles of Disability Justice* as articulated by Patty Berne and Sins Invalid, collective access to food fosters *collective liberation* as the struggle for survival costs less time, labor, and emotional resources for everyone. Progress in the field of food literacy will happen when the framework is influenced by research *lead by those most impacted*, such as people with disabilities and other minoritized communities. Schwartz et al. illustrate the current pressing need for more research at the intersections of food access, household food insecurity (HFI), and disability; just eight of the 106 articles in their scoping review started with a critical definition of disability. "A social model of disability can inform future research by acknowledging the role of socio-environmental influences on the production and experience(s) of disability" (Schwartz et al. 107). Food systems should be *sustainable* and food literacy requires *interdependence*. The *habitus* of food that the field of food literacy ultimately reifies or creates should be built from the principle of *collective access;* collective access requires consulting individuals and communities who live with minoritized ability, race, gender, or class identities when developing food literacy frameworks. Access to food is survival and building food systems that foster collective access to food is love.

Research at the intersections of disability and food access should, as Schwartz et al. posit, interact critically with the definition of disability, reconsidering how researchers define and categorize oppression before studying communities of disabled people and people with disabilities. From the outside, my food insecurity might look like laziness or antisocial behavior, but my mental disability and cultural background create barriers to food access that are difficult to discern from the outside. In that way, reciprocity *recognizes the wholeness* and value of the embodied experience of research subjects. Reciprocity as a guiding principle also encourages *leadership of the most impacted* in the interpretation of data.

The emphasis that a reciprocal framework places on "scholarly activism, or commitment to effectuating change" and the "anti-capitalist politic" of the *Ten Principles of Disability Justice* combine to produce non-conforming bodies advocating to disrupt the profitability of food systems in order to foster equitable access. And we must recognize that capitalist food systems are unsustainable–a food literacy framework should foster sustainable habits of food from the individual to the global level. Researchers must "pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation" (Sins Invalid). Individual *habitus* is not to be blamed for institutional foodways; however, whenever possible we must all look critically at the sustainability of our *habitus* of food to start to foster *collective access*.

I haven't had the space or resources yet to imagine what it might look like to sponsor food literacy for my students in Writing and Rhetoric. As I write this, I haven't had students in Virginia, and it will likely be years before I have the opportunity to spend time on a community-engaged project that might sponsor food literacy for my students and their communities simultaneously while also making those foodways accessible for research. Until I can convince someone to allow me that space, I've found a comfortable level of existence and can offer my experiences and some theory. I also hope that others might take up the call.

I used the idle time between bites on the fishing line to make lists of all the adjectives I'd one day use to describe the fertility of the swamps, to persuade the rest of the world to respect them the way my community does. The community in "cancer alley"–that stretch of Highway 90 between New Orleans and Baton Rouge affectionately named for the oil refineries that pollute the land and water–works the land to keep its people from going hungry. But it is succumbing ever more rapidly to climate change caused by neoliberal capitalist consumption that includes, in no small part, individualist foodways.

Community is a privilege in this age of hyper-individualistic social disaggregation, but community is a necessity for sustainable foodways, especially for those of us with intersectionally minoritized identity categories. I had a hard time thinking of myself as food insecure, even when surviving on a single daily on-campus meal and enjoying almost nothing I ate. When I requested assistance from the university, I was forced to sign a form attesting that I was food insecure. The stigma associated with social services was overwhelming; I almost didn't check the box. I was eating, after all. A friend had to remind me that, yes, I was experiencing food insecurity; "you mostly

come here to use our kitchen." I turned my friends' kitchens into safe spaces of Cajun food *habitus* where I could relax and prepare inexpensive, nutritious food for myself and my queer chosen family. For all my research in food literacy and all the administrators I bothered, it was queer community that helped me to access food in ways that are comforting and sustaining rather than fraught.

Let's infuse that vibe into our research and teaching focused on food access and food literacy. As literacy scholars, we can bring the nuance of community literacy sponsorship to other disciplines while allowing food literacy to infiltrate how we discuss food and foodways in our disciplines. The barriers to food access posed by my mental disability and cultural background–my *habitus* of food–were mitigated in part through queer community building. The epistemic whiteness that places responsibility for food access on the individual also creates inaccessible institutions like my campus's student pantry. Communities of food access are necessary for all of us, so it is in everyone's best interest to sponsor sustainable community food literacies.

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Author Bio

Tyler Martinez is an intellectual po'boy – a queer, Cajun, first-generation Ph.D. student of Writing and Rhetoric at George Mason University in Virginia. He earned both a B.A. in Linguistics and an M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Before becoming a full-time purveyor of language, he worked for a decade as a barista, server, and line cook in restaurants across South Louisiana. He hopes to continue to explore the intersections of queerness, disability studies, community literacy, and food access.